

## 2 Boehme's Life and Times

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### I BOEHME'S LIFE: DISTINGUISHING TRUTH FROM MYTH

There have been few more polarizing figures in early modern religious history than the German Lutheran mystic Jacob Boehme (ca.1575–1624), who has been regarded as a divinely illuminated genius by his most devoted disciples yet also reviled in equal measure as an incomprehensible, ignorant heretic by his fiercest critics. Partly derived from his reminiscences in conversation, Boehme's earliest biography was posthumously crafted, embroidered, and continually reworked by his principal admirer, the Silesian nobleman Abraham von Franckenberg (1593–1652). It is predominantly hagiographic, the eight extant versions produced between 1631 and 1651, supplementing aspects of Boehme's own carefully self-fashioned identity, which emphasized that though a humble, innocent artisan, he was the recipient of profound God-given knowledge.

Contrary to what has usually been assumed, the date of Boehme's nativity is uncertain. Most likely, he was born sometime between mid-November 1574 and mid-June 1575. Boehme was the fourth of five children of Jacob (d.1618) and his first wife Ursula (d.1607?), Lutheran peasants undoubtedly not of the "poorest sort" as von Franckenberg claimed—they were modest farmers—yet possibly of "sober and honest demeanour." He came from the village of Alt-Seidenberg (modern Zawidów, Poland). This was roughly eight miles from Görlitz, a town in Upper Lusatia of around 10,000 inhabitants by 1600. During his childhood, Boehme was said to have tended cattle and subsequently to have attended school, where he probably received an elementary education. Young Jacob, whose father was a lay jurist, deacon, and vestryman, was, according to von Franckenberg, "addicted to the feare of God" and a "willing hearer" of church sermons.<sup>2</sup> Progressing from shoemaker's apprentice to journeyman, he registered himself as a burgher of Görlitz and purchased a cobbler's shop there for 240 marks on April 24, 1599. Just over two weeks later on May 10th, he married Katharina Kuntzschmann, a wealthy local butcher's daughter. They had four sons: Jacob (bap. January 29, 1600–fl. 1628), Michael (bap. January 8, 1602–fl. March 1608), Tobias (bap. September 11, 1603–fl. 1630), and

Elias (bap. September 4, 1611–d. November 10, 1625).<sup>3</sup> On August 21st, 1599, Boehme bought a large property for three hundred marks on the east bank of the river Neisse, which still stands.<sup>4</sup>

Boehme's earliest premonitions and visionary experiences are undated. While still a boy tending cattle, he climbed the Landeskron (a hill southwest of Görlitz), where among the big red stones he found a wooden container full of money. Being honest, he left this untouched, and von Franckenberg later interpreted the incident—which may have been invented given its similarity to local legends—as an omen of Boehme's "future spiritual Admission to the Sight of the hidden Treasury of the Wisdom and Mysteries of God and Nature."<sup>5</sup> On another occasion, when an apprentice minding his master's shop, Boehme was said to have been visited by a stranger who predicted greatness for him as well as misery, poverty, and persecution. A different time, Boehme had his first supposed visionary experience when, having "awakened within himself" and at the same time become alarmed by "manifold scholarly quarrelling over religion (to which he could not conform and subject himself)," he was enraptured by a divine light for seven days.<sup>6</sup> Then about 1600, Boehme was again possessed with a divine light and, suddenly seeing a pewter vessel, was "brought to the inward ground or *Centrum* of the hidden *Nature*." Presently going out into an open field he beheld "the *Wonder-workes* of the Creator" in the "Signatures, Shapes, Figures, and Qualities or Properties of all created things," very clearly and manifestly laid open.<sup>7</sup>

In 1610, having vended his property but continuing to live there paying rent, Boehme bought two houses for 375 marks. He sold the smaller and made the other his home. This new dwelling was very close to his old residence, situated within the Neisse Gate at the eastern edge of Görlitz and conveniently on the road to Liegnitz (modern Legnica, Poland). That same year, he also received a third divine illumination. Unwilling to forget what had been imparted to him by the Holy Spirit, he secretly set pen to paper for his own edification. Between January and June of 1612, he made a fair copy of his celebrated "Morgenröthe im Aufgang" or "Aurora" (literally "Morning Glow, Ascending"), a long, unfinished work that seems to have been at least twelve years in the making. But following the clandestine circulation of the manuscript and the transcription of additional copies—probably on the initiative of a good friend, Karl Ender von Sercha (1568–1624), though supposedly without the author's consent—there was trouble. According to von Franckenberg, Boehme was subjected to virulent invective poured out from the pulpit by Pastor Gregor Richter (1560–1624), who stirred up the magistracy against him. Consequently, this humble and "blessed" man was committed to custody, had his book seized, was declared an idiot, and admonished to refrain from writing such books that "*did not belong to his profession and condition*."<sup>8</sup>

These events can be corroborated by the diary of Bartholomäus Scultetus (1540–1614), who, besides being a notable mathematician, astronomer,

and advocate of Paracelsian teaching, was then Görlitz's mayor. Although Scultetus's diary is no longer extant, there exist slightly different versions of three extracts referring to Boehme. Thus Scultetus recorded that on Friday, July 26th, 1613:

Jacob Boehme, a shoemaker living between the gates behind the hospital forge, was summoned to the Senate-House for punishment and asked about his enthusiastic opinions. Thereupon he was put in prison and as soon as his book, written in quarto, was brought from his house by Oswald [Krause], he was released from confinement and warned to cease from such matters.<sup>9</sup>

Then on Sunday, July 28th, Scultetus noted that Richter used a text against false prophets to preach a sharp and "tart" sermon against Boehme the shoemaker. Finally, on Tuesday, July 30th, Boehme was brought before Görlitz's Lutheran ministry and rigorously examined "concerning his Confession of Faith."<sup>10</sup>

By this time, Boehme had already sold his cobbler's bench and begun to engage in small-scale commerce, trading in yarns and gloves. After an interval of several years, he had a fourth spiritual experience that resulted in his most creative period. Supposedly stirred up again by the motion of the Holy Spirit and encouraged by the entreaties of certain God-fearing people, he took up his pen, producing "The Three Principles of the Divine Essence" (1619), "The Threefold Life of Man" (completed and copied by September 1620), "Forty Questions concerning the Soul" (completed by August 1620), "The Incarnation of Jesus Christ" (completed between May and August 1620), "Six Points," both "Great" and "Small" (1620), and a number of other treatises, including "Signatura Rerum" (completed by August 1621) and "Mysterium Magnum" (completed by September 1623). Von Franckenberg claimed that, although Boehme wrote slowly in a plain, legible hand, he never altered nor crossed out a single word in his writing, "but just as it was suggested to his Mind by the Spirit of God, so it stood clear and untranscribed upon the Paper."<sup>11</sup> Unless one believes in divine dictation, such astonishing fluency can be discounted. There are, for example, two different versions of the "Aurora" extant in the hands of various copyists. One is significantly shorter, suggesting that Boehme's method of composition was to elaborate on inchoate drafts. If he then finished these works as the opportunity arose, this explains how he seemingly wrote so much so quickly.

Boehme boasted that his manuscript writings were known throughout Silesia as well as in many places in the Margraviate of Brandenburg, Meissen, and Saxony. Even so, they remained in that form until the beginning of January 1624 when Johann Sigismund von Schweinichen (1590–1664) paid for the unauthorized printing of *Der Weg zu Christo* (Görlitz, 1624), which contained three short pieces: "True Repentance," "True Resignation," and "A Dialogue between a scholar and his master, concerning the Super-sensual

life.” This transition from scribal publication to print was important. Nevertheless, having a work in the public domain without the approval of Görlitz’s town council or clergy antagonized Richter, who denounced Boehme as a “common Disturber of the Peace, a turbulent, restless, sorry Fellow, and a Heretic.” So bitter was Richter’s tirade that the matter came to the attention of Görlitz’s town council.<sup>12</sup> Presented with “manifold” complaints against Boehme’s “alleged pernicious doctrine,” they decreed that he be summoned before them. Their minute-book of March 26th, 1624 records that:

the shoemaker and confused enthusiast or visionary, says that he composed the book . . . though he did not have it printed . . . Was warned by the Council to seek fortune elsewhere, or in default of fair means this must be reported to the Illustrious Prince Elector. Thereupon he declared that he would take his departure as soon as possible.<sup>13</sup>

The next day, Richter finished the third and final part of his humanist satire, censuring the “enthusiastic shoemaker’s fanatic books.” Here, Richter inveighed against Boehme’s new manner of speaking and the many blasphemies in his text, which stank “*abominably of Shoemakers Pitch and Blacking.*” Among these alleged noxious notions were Boehme’s denial of God the Father’s eternity and his teaching of a Quaternity, or four-fold nature of God. There was also personal vilification: the shoemaker was an unlearned, drunken, rascally knave aspiring to be a new prophet when he was really the Antichrist. Boehme in turn quickly wrote a letter to the council (April 3rd) pleading that he was a simple layman whose divinely inspired work should not be condemned to be burned and including an impassioned defense refuting this horrid libel (10 April).<sup>14</sup>

Although Richter had demanded Boehme’s banishment, and although a fanciful story circulating more than twenty-five years later claimed that this falsely accused “patient and blessed” man was banished by majority verdict of the town council only to be recalled the following day, Boehme was admonished rather than commanded by the council to go away for a while.<sup>15</sup> Clearly, it was advisable to leave until the controversy abated; as he put it, “the fire of *Satans Anger and Rage burneth at Home.*”<sup>16</sup> Initially he headed south to Zittau. There he met with some adherents before traveling west to Dresden at the invitation of certain eminent people attending the court of Johann Georg I, Prince-Elector of Saxony. Setting out on May 9th, 1624, and arriving by May 15th, Boehme stayed at the home of the court’s alchemist, Benedikt Hinckelmann (d.1642). Word of his coming soon spread among the Prince-Elector’s entourage, and influential figures such as counselor Joachim von Loß (1576–1633); the Marshal of the House, Alexander von Ragewitz (d.1629); and Dietrich von Taube (1594–1639), who was Master of Horse and chief chamberlain, signaled their desire to meet with him. Boehme explained this surprisingly warm reception, which differed sharply from his treatment at Görlitz, by ingenuously remarking that

his little printed book was “loved and liked” by these great personages—so much so that many consulted it daily, acknowledging it to be a “*divine Gift*.” Presently, on the feast of Pentecost (Whitsunday), May 26th, Johann Melchior von Schwalbach (1581–1635), von Ragewitz, von Taube, and an unnamed councilor visited Boehme at his lodging. They apparently listened to him very willingly in an atmosphere of love and kindness, promising their “favour and assistance.” The following Thursday, May 30th, Boehme was fetched by coach together with Hinckelmann and a physician to von Loß’s castle about a mile from Dresden. Von Loß was considered a very learned man and he, too, loved Boehme’s “Cause and *Gifts*.” Indeed, Boehme expected von Loß to act as his patron, thereby enabling him to publish his work more freely without fear of retribution. Another noteworthy reader and apparent admirer of Boehme’s treatise on “True Repentance” was the Lutheran superintendent Ägidus Strauch (1583–1657), who, together with the court chaplain, Dr Matthias Hoë von Hoënegg (1580–1645), had begun teaching the doctrine of “the New Birth and the *Inward Man*.” Even so, Strauch still required clarification on certain abstruse points beyond his comprehension and arranged for a conference with Boehme at his lodging on Sunday, June 16th.<sup>17</sup>

While the details of Boehme’s theological discussions at Dresden are unknown, there is no contemporary evidence indicating that he was formally examined about his views. This official silence contrasts with the well-known account of the Breslau physician, Cornelius Weißner, who, after initially rejecting Boehme’s ideas, became a follower. Writing in February of 1651, Weißner maintained that Boehme was interviewed in the presence of the Prince-Elector by six Lutheran theologians, including the famous Johann Gerhard (1582–1637), and two professors of mathematics about the “high Mysteries” contained in his writings. He responded to their difficult theological, philosophical, and astrological questions with such “meekness of spirit” and “depth of knowledge” that these eminent men reportedly found nothing objectionable in his “mild” answers.<sup>18</sup> Despite being widely accepted during the seventeenth century and indeed reinforced with a document written by a Görlitz councilor in 1669, modern scholarship has generally questioned the reliability of Weißner’s narrative even though there is universal agreement that no judgment was passed against Boehme. All the same, the motivations of the various councilors and court officials mentioned in Boehme’s correspondence are not entirely clear, nor do we know what may have happened behind the scenes. It does appear, however, that Boehme’s announcement of the dawn of a Great Reformation, of a new age of love, patience, peace and joy, went largely unheeded.

By July, Boehme had returned to Görlitz. Despite probable exhaustion, he then undertook a journey to the family seat of his supporter von Schweinichen at Schweinhaus, Silesia (modern Świny, Poland). There he spent several weeks in the company of von Schweinichen and von Franckenberg. Boehme was in ill health, however, and, despite subsisting on a practically



vegetarian diet, fell sick about mid-August of a burning fever which he exacerbated by drinking too much water.<sup>19</sup> At his request, he was taken back to Görlitz, arriving at his house on November 7th, where the Paracelsian physician, Tobias Kober (1587–1625), and his colleague, Melchior Berndt of Zittau, attended him. But they despaired of his symptoms: rumbling bowels, pain in his left side, swollen belly and feet, gaping mouth, great decay of the chest and face, and discolored urine. With the end approaching, Boehme received Pastor Elias Dietrich, who required his assent to questions of faith before administering the sacrament of the Lord's Supper to him. Boehme died about six o'clock in the morning on Sunday, November 17th, 1624. Shortly beforehand, he supposedly called his son Tobias, asking him whether he heard the "sweet" harmonious music without his chamber. Boehme's last recorded words were "*Now go I hence into Paradise.*"<sup>20</sup>

At Boehme's request, the funeral arrangements were undertaken by Kober, but the dead man's family and friends were unable to prevent both the shunning of his corpse by the majority of Görlitz's clergy and the subsequent desecration of his grave. Although the text first chosen for Boehme's funeral sermon was Revelation 3:5, the new principal minister Nikolaus Thomas—Richter had predeceased Boehme by three months—washed his hands of it, insisting he would have nothing to do with a man notorious for infecting the region with "*Fanaticism and Enthusiasm.*" Boehme's widow, Katharina, and his heirs were thus forced to petition the mayor, who convened a meeting of the town council. After much debate and with legal approval, they concluded that it was a humane and pious duty to grant heretics a decent burial and for the deceased to have a funeral sermon. The next day, Katharina and her children petitioned the town council, requesting immediate interment since Boehme's corpse was rapidly decomposing and ready to burst. They consented. Pastor Dietrich who, like his senior colleague, had refused to preach the funeral sermon, was ordered to do so and instructed to pass over Boehme's doctrinal errors in silence. On Wednesday, November 20th, the church bells of St. Nicholas were rung, hymns sung, and Boehme, neatly dressed within his coffin, was solemnly laid to rest. Although the principal minister had excused himself from the occasion by pretending to be sick, three other clergymen were obliged to join the procession to the grave, which was very near the churchyard's center. They slunk off, however, at the nearest opportunity and did not enter church with other mourners as was customary. Despite some mockery amongst the "great concourse" of people present, the cortege of friends, sympathizers, shoemakers, and tanners outnumbered them. Inside, Dietrich began his sermon by saying he would rather be elsewhere, asserting that he did not share Boehme's heterodox beliefs. Having publicly exculpated himself with this unusual preamble, he pointedly chose to preach on Hebrews 9:27, "it is appointed unto men once to die, but after this the judgment." In the evening, Dietrich returned his fee and, fearing censure from his fellow priests for having complied with the council's directive, requested an indemnification from them.<sup>21</sup>

Boehme's grave was originally marked by a black wooden cross sent as a gift by unnamed Silesian friends (probably von Schweinichen and, among others, perhaps also von Franckenberg). Erected at least one day after his burial, it fittingly consisted of an elaborate "Hieroglyphical Monument." At its top was the Hebrew name of Jesus "יהושע" encompassed by twelve golden beams, under which a reclining child rested its head on a skull. Below were eight initials, V.H.I.L.I.C.I.V., representing Boehme's motto, "Unser Heil Im Leben Jesu Christi In Uns" (*Our Salvation is In the Life of Jesus Christ In Us*). And below that, a broad oval circle on which was inscribed Boehme's epitaph. His last words were written on the vertical shaft reading upwards. Yet the most enigmatic feature was a threefold painted "mystical" device. On the right from the south side was a black eagle on a rock, its left foot treading on a serpent's head, its right clutching a palm, with a lily-twigg in its beak (the lily-twigg was a symbol of new regeneration affected by Christ's presence within man). On the left from the north side stood a lion with a crown and cross on its head, its right hind-foot on a cube, its left on a globe, its right fore-paw brandishing a flaming sword, and its left grasping a burning heart. In the middle, below the epitaph on the stock of the cross (and resembling the twenty-ninth of Paracelsus's magical figures) was a lamb with a bishop's miter, beneath a palm tree, by a spring in a meadow, feeding among flowers. Each device also bore a single Latin word, "veni," "vidi," "vici;" an apparent allusion to coming into the world, seeing Satan's fall, and conquering Hell. Within a year, however, this elaborate memorial had been "bespattered with Filth," mangled and defaced by the "*blind furious zeale*" of Boehme's hateful persecutors, who, unable to crucify the "blessed" man in life, destroyed his cross after death.<sup>22</sup>

There are no authentic portraits of Boehme. Those likenesses that exist—oddly, his hair tends to get thicker rather than thinner over time while his weight fluctuates alarmingly—appear to be based mainly on contemporary descriptions of his physical appearance. Best known is von Franckenberg's portrayal:

The external physical form of J.B. was time-worn, of ordinary appearance, small stature, low forehead, raised temples, slightly hooked nose, grey or intensely sky-blue glittering eyes, which, moreover, were like windows to Solomon's Temple, a short and spare beard, and small thin voice; yet gracious of speech, well-bred in manner, humble of conduct, patient of suffering, gentle of heart. His spirit, highly illuminated by God beyond all natural measure, and his utterly pure, comprehensible High German manner of speaking can be judged and recognized from these, his unfalsified writings in the divine light.<sup>23</sup>

Christian Bernhard (d.1649), a toll-collector of Sagan (modern Zagan, Poland), depicted him similarly:

A middling person, but for the most part smaller rather than larger, lean body, black beard, with a staff and little white sack of books, in which he

had a little bread, a slight black coat, miserable worn clothes, very dirty from pitch, in the manner of a cobbler. The pants wide open at the front.<sup>24</sup>

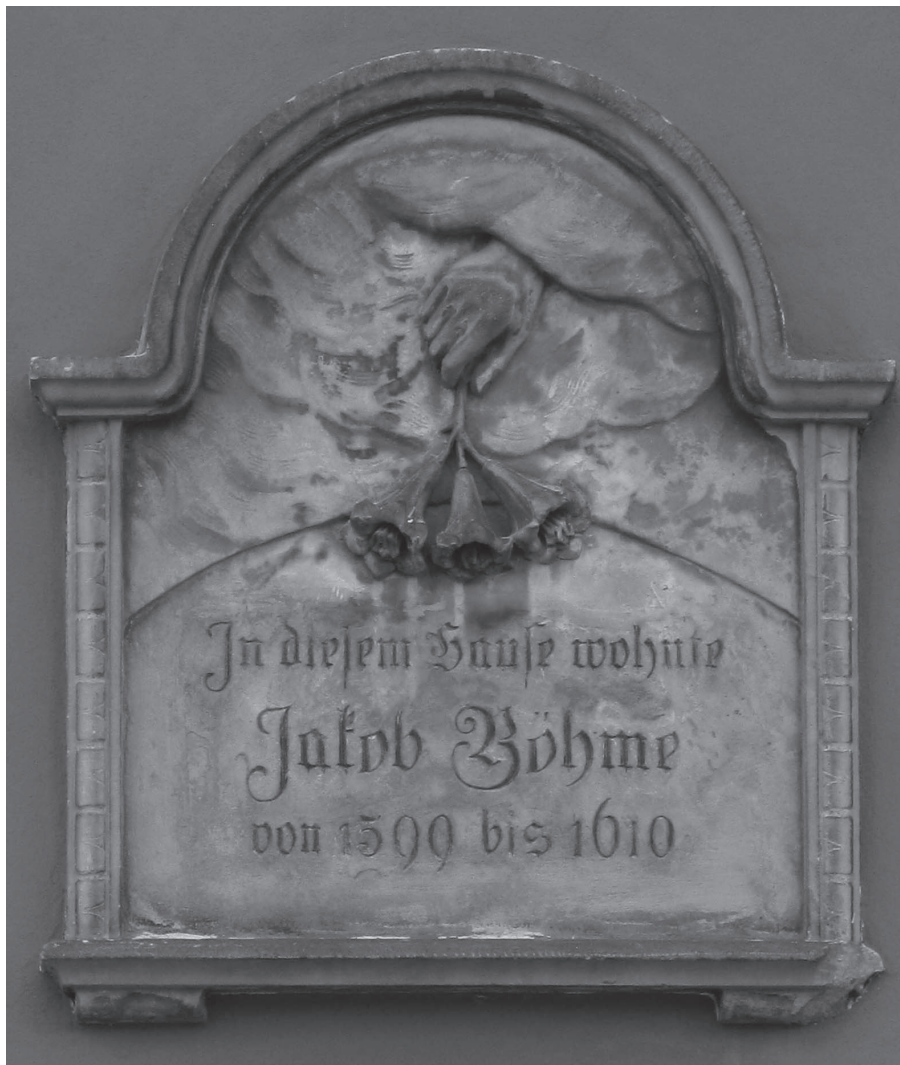
If the latter sketch is trustworthy, it represents an impecunious individual. While Boehme had evidently enjoyed a period of prosperity and indeed inherited half his father's estate in 1618, he apparently soon forsook his trade, devoting himself with little distraction to his calling. During intermittent periods of deprivation and devastation following the outbreak of



*Figure 2.1* Jacob Boehme's house on the east bank of the river Neisse where he lived between 1599 and 1610. The property has undergone restoration since then and today houses a small museum in Zgorzelec, Poland. © Copyright Ariel Hessayon, June 2012



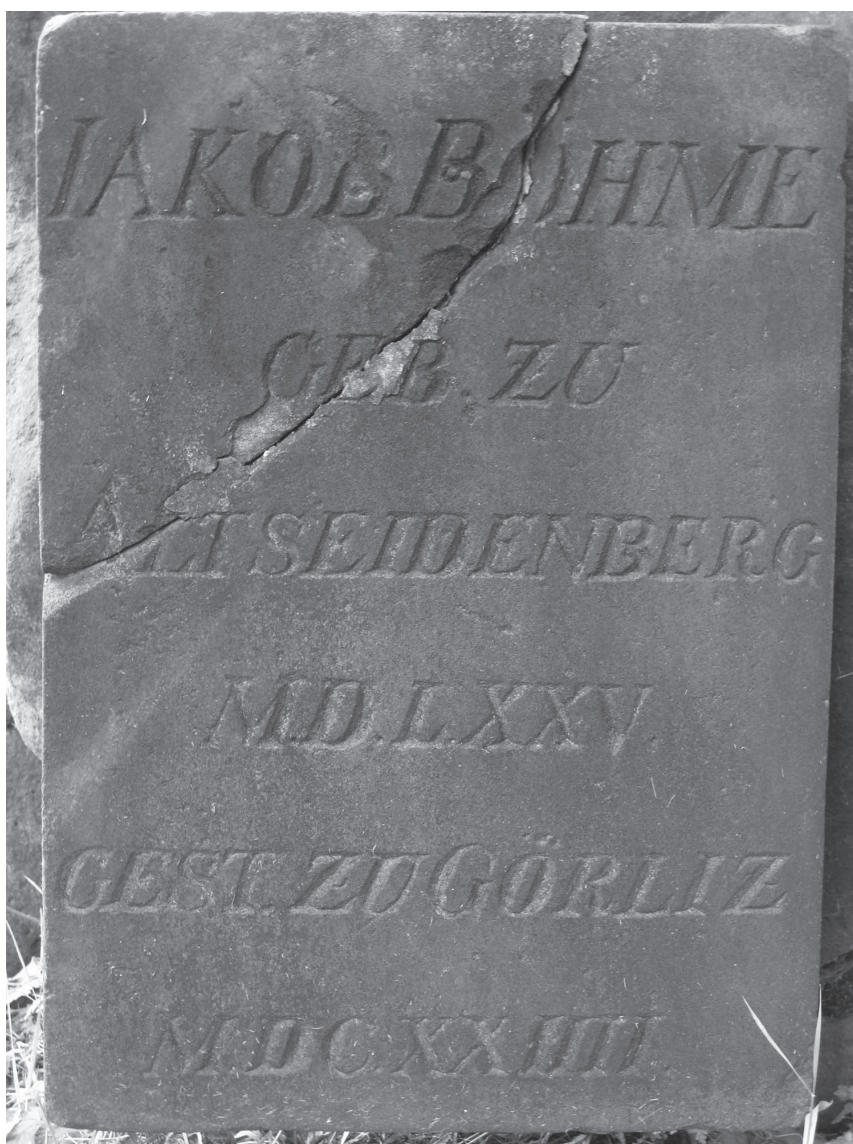
what became known as the Thirty Years' War (1618–1648), he received gifts of corn from his patron Karl Ender, which provided essential sustenance as well as a convenient method of smuggling books hidden within sacks. Other supporters sent him food and money, perhaps in exchange for permission to copy his anonymous manuscripts, whose contents and authorship were sometimes clarified by letters accompanying them. For his part, Boehme served as a go-between, negotiating the purchase of books at the Leipzig fair and the sale of other people's works as well as safe passage to the intended recipients. Although his wife continued the family yarn trading business, this still suggests an almost hand-to-mouth existence. Defending himself against Richter, Boehme claimed to be a poor beer-drinking man,



*Figure 2.2* Plaque placed by the Oberlausitzische Gesellschaft der Wissenschaften outside Boehme's house on the tercentenary of his death in 1924. © Copyright Ariel Hessayon, June 2012

unable to afford foreign wine or brandy. Though little is known of his later financial affairs, Boehme may have died in relative poverty since a collection was taken to defray his funeral expenses. Besides property, the only thing of value he bequeathed was his writings, which had been dispersed. He left specific instructions to his son Tobias to collect them from the people they had been lent to, probably intending to deposit his literary remains with von Schweinichen.

Von Franckenberg added that Boehme had a seal consisting of a hand reaching out from heaven holding a stalk of three full-blown lilies. This represented the “Kingdom of the Lily in the Paradise of God,” which was to



*Figure 2.3* One of Boehme’s later gravestones. This was erected in about 1800 on the initiative of Karl Gottlob von Anton, a member of Görlitz city senate, and funded by subscription. © Copyright Ariel Hessayon, June 2012



be manifested in the “last Time, when the End shall have been brought back to it's Beginning, and the Circle closed.”<sup>25</sup> Boehme was also fond of signing friends' albums with a stanza:

To whom Time is as Eternity,  
And Eternity as Time,  
He is freed from all strife.<sup>26</sup>



*Figure 2.4* Top: Boehme's black marble gravestone placed by the Oberlausitzische Gesellschaft der Wissenschaften in 1869. The inscription includes a reference to Revelation 3:5, the text initially chosen for Boehme's funeral sermon. Bottom: Philosophische Kugel placed on top of Boehme's grave in 1922. It was donated by American admirers, Mr. Richard A. Beale and an unnamed countrywoman. © Copyright Ariel Hessayon, June 2012

## II REAPPRAISING THE DEVELOPMENT OF BOEHME'S THOUGHT IN CONTEXT

Boehme's death served only to increase the aura surrounding this "great Wonder of the *German Nation*." His apparent meekness and piety were presented as a model of sanctity, his humble occupation compared favorably with the lowly trades of Christ's apostles, and his persecution by scholastically-trained clergymen likened to Jesus' fate at the hands of scheming Pharisees. Boehme thus became a "Witness of God," a "rejected Corner-Stone" (Psalm 118:22, Matthew 21:42) who had incurred the displeasure of "the logically-learned School-Gentry, and the Metaphysical Church-Luminaries."<sup>27</sup> Primarily disseminated through von Franckenberg's continually reworked hagiography and a trans-European epistolary network, a legend began to take shape portraying Boehme as a simple, barely literate artisan who had been given the gift of "Universall knowledge of God and Nature," and shown:

the Centre of all Beings; *how all things arise from God Originally: consist in God, and againe returne, and flow in to him.*<sup>28</sup>

Praising Boehme's "*profound*" and "*deep-grounded*" writings, von Franckenberg also believed they hinted at the great wonders God would perform in future generations.<sup>29</sup>

Towards the end of his life, and certainly by 1620, some of Boehme's readers had begun calling him by the code-name "Teutonicus." Most likely this was a necessary expedient to protect his anonymity rather than, as von Franckenberg claimed, an honorific bestowed by the learned and much travelled Liegnitz physician Balthasar Walther (1558–ca.1630). A student of Paracelsus, alchemy, magic, and Kabbalah, Walther became acquainted with Boehme in 1617 and was subsequently briefly appointed director of the secret laboratory at Dresden. Walther was said to have dubbed Boehme the "*Teutonic Philosopher*," and von Franckenberg speculated that this either referred to the German Dominican friar Johannes Teutonicus (ca.1180–1252), or else indicated Boehme's nationality coupled with the "exceptional gift" of such works being "written in High German."<sup>30</sup> The moniker "*Teutonicum Philosophum*," however, did not appear in print until a decade after Boehme's death with the publication of an abridged and unreliable German edition of *Aurora* (Amsterdam, 1634). By 1647, the English translator John Sparrow had adopted the nominative form "*Teutonicus Philosophus*," which became anglicized as the "*Teutonick Philosopher*."

Significantly, despite declaring that he was a simple man and "no Prophet," "Teutonicus" (alias Boehme) was still regarded by certain followers as a prophet of the Thirty Years' War.<sup>31</sup> Although Boehme was not moved to address the conflict in a specific text, his writings, particularly his epistles, contain many references to contemporary events. Here the work of, among

others, John Stoudt and, more recently, Andrew Weeks has done much to resituate Boehme within an historical context that too many—though by no means all—earlier scholars had been inclined to pass over. Thus, in “The Three Principles of the Divine Essence” (1619) Boehme despaired of the multitude of sects and religious controversies, warning that “great hatred,” envy, and persecution fomented war and insurrection, which would lead to slaughter, destruction, and ruination.<sup>32</sup> Again, having recently witnessed the coronation at Prague of the Calvinist champion Frederick V of the Palatinate (the ill-fated “Winter King” of Bohemia), Boehme predicted in a letter dated November 14th, 1619, that there would be “great War and Contention” resulting in the desolation of many cities and strongholds. Drawing on the prophecies of Ezekiel, he foresaw “the great Slaughter of the children of *Babel*” at the hands of the Calvinist prince of Transylvania, Gabriel Bethlen (1580–1629), who had captured the Hungarian city Pressburg (modern Bratislava, Slovakia) and was marching on Vienna.<sup>33</sup> Following the passage through Görlitz of the newly elected Holy Roman Emperor Ferdinand II in March of 1620 and then in August of disease-carrying foreign mercenaries, the Catholic Emperor’s Lutheran ally Johann Georg I of Saxony invaded western Lusatia on September 3rd. The Elector-Prince initially besieged and bombarded Bautzen, which capitulated on October 5th. Recounting what he had learned from soldiers and civilians fleeing the ruined town, Boehme described how Bautzen was ferociously and relentlessly pounded for three weeks with “terrible” canon fire and a variety of incendiary devices. Reportedly, 1,700 people were killed and more than 1,100 houses destroyed. Many survivors were trapped hidden in cellars among the smoking debris, and those managing to escape were robbed by an enemy intent on plunder. Fearing the loss of Lusatia, Boehme cautioned:

Babel, the beast and the whore are in flames. He who now hopes to become blessed must gird himself with patience and assume nothing worldly for himself, for he will receive nothing and shall indeed lose his soul.<sup>34</sup>

The apocalyptic mood was pervasive. That summer, a Liegnitz toll-collector named Paul Kaym (d.1634) had written to Boehme enclosing two small treatises. These contained chiliastic interpretations of scriptural passages concerning the “*Last Times*,” “the first Resurrection of the dead,” the thousand-year Sabbath, the ruin and imminent fall of Babel (which would be utterly destroyed about 1630), and the rebuilding of Zion, which would usher in a golden age. Responding on August 14th, 1620, Boehme cautiously agreed that the growth and imminent destruction of Babel was manifest. All the same, because there were only hints of these events in Revelation and the apocryphal 2 Esdras, he did not know when this would happen; nor did Boehme know whether the world would continue for seven thousand years or if there was to be a millennial Sabbath, since these were



mysteries hidden from mankind. Accordingly, he warned against attempting to penetrate God's secrets without divine illumination.<sup>35</sup> This reluctance to become embroiled in the specifics of apocalyptic chronology was consistent with Boehme's understanding of the Last Judgment: he believed that, at the end of time, God would punish the wicked and reward his martyred saints together with the rest of the righteous godly, but he did not risk calculating a date. He eventually enlarged on this subject in what appears to have been a lost book on the "Last Judgment" (1624?)—a work reportedly destroyed during the burning of Gross Glogau, Silesia (modern Głogów, Poland).

Though not a committed millenarian, Boehme nonetheless became convinced as the war progressed that a period of great tribulation had begun; war, uproar, insurrection, calamity, and death were imminent. In an unusual postscript to a letter dated February 20th, 1623, addressed to von Franckenberg, he drew on an established tradition of political prophecy that fused biblical symbols with heraldic devices to make a series of bold predictions: Babel would be destroyed, the Turks would turn Christian, and the Holy Roman Emperor's underlings would turn upon him savagely, clipping his military power.<sup>36</sup>

While the earliest phase of the Thirty Years' War provides a crucial if sometimes neglected backdrop for reading Boehme's letters and later treatises, his engagement with contemporary affairs was of longstanding duration. Thus, he continually despaired of hypocrisy and contention, bemoaning the debilitating effect of intra-denominational religious disputes as well as untrammelled magisterial authority operating in conjunction with clerical self-interest to enforce outward conformity. Moreover, as Weeks has shown, sections of many works can also be read as irenic, anticlerical interventions in heated doctrinal debates over the sacrament of the Lord's Supper and the related issue of scriptural authority. As he notes in our volume, the original fair copy of this text was transcribed during a six-month period between January and June of 1612, coinciding with important political developments and debates about guaranteeing religious toleration in Upper Lusatia.<sup>37</sup> Context, however, is not all. For there is an additional psychological dimension: the transformative illuminative experience that impelled Boehme to compose "Aurora" had been preceded by a prolonged bout of melancholy. This passage from depression to exaltation, suggestive of a troubled soul, was typical of many seventeenth-century Protestant religious autobiographies, which frequently culminated with the spiritual suffering, even death, of the sinful protagonist and their joyful rebirth in the light and love of God.<sup>38</sup>

Boehme maintained in his correspondence that he had written "Aurora" in sudden bursts of inspiration, like a shower of rain which hit "whatsoever it lighteth upon." He could have written in "a more accurate, fair, and plain" manner, yet "the burning fire did often force forward with *speed*; and the hand and pen must hasten directly after it." When deprived of divine knowledge, however, he could scarcely recognize or understand his own writings. Boehme also ingenuously claimed that he was an "illiterate," simple man of

little “understanding, and shallow capacity.” He had not received instruction from men or learning from reading books, but had written “out of my own Book which was opened in me, being the Noble similitude of God.”<sup>39</sup> This self-serving myth was perpetuated by von Franckenberg, who insisted that Boehme wrote secretly for his own benefit and that, when setting pen to paper, he was “furnished with no Books at all but the Holy Bible.”<sup>40</sup> Elsewhere, however, Boehme was slightly more candid about his sources. In “Aurora” and then the “Three Principles,” he acknowledged having read the writings of “very high Masters, hoping to find therein the ground and true depth.” Among these were works by students of physics, mathematics, and astrology. To his dismay, he found nothing his soul lusted after within these “Master-pieces,” only “very many contrary opinions,” and a “half dead Spirit.”<sup>41</sup>

Besides texts, Boehme acquired knowledge through an increasingly widening social network of friends, correspondents, and patrons—a milieu fleshed out fully in Leigh's Penman's chapter. Thus, it appears Boehme drew on the same rhetorical techniques as Martin Moller (1547–1606), appointed chief pastor at St. Nicholas, Görlitz in July of 1600.<sup>42</sup> The author of several works, including *Mysterium Magnum* (1595) and *Praxis Evangeliorum* (1601), Moller's teachings emphasized regeneration, Christ within, and the primacy of inward spiritual experience. Although Moller died when Boehme was aged about thirty-one, linguistic parallels suggest that his sermons may have left an impression on Boehme's “Aurora.”<sup>43</sup> Whether or not this book was secretly circulated among the remnants of Moller's “Conventicle of God's Real Servants” (of which Boehme was allegedly a member), it is clear that, through scribal publication, it brought him to far wider attention. Repeatedly copied, versions of the text passed through villages, towns, and cities where they were seen by clergymen, physicians, and members of the nobility. Consequently, Boehme was implored by the more receptive of his predominantly well-educated readership to reveal more of his “gifts, knowledge, and confession.” Never a lay preacher and uncomfortable in this newly assigned role of teacher, he nonetheless relented, acquiring disciples through a mixture of receiving guests, personal visits, and epistolary exchange.<sup>44</sup>

Among Boehme's circle were physicians, alchemists, mystics, prophets, possessors of magical and Rosicrucian works, various toll collectors, officials, and noblemen. As Weeks, Penman, and others have recognized, this apparently exclusively male network, which was spread across parts of the Margraviate of Brandenburg, Saxony, Lusatia, Silesia, and Bohemia, played an important part in shaping the direction of Boehme's intellectual development. Equally significant were the mercantile journeys that took Boehme to Breslau, Prague, Sagan, and Zittau, bringing him into touch with sympathetic tradesmen. Moreover, from 1621 he began visiting supporters among the Protestant dissenters in Silesia and elsewhere. These additional contacts provided him with news and probably made it easier to acquire writings in his native tongue.<sup>45</sup>

As we have seen, Boehme seldom named his sources. Even so, he appears to have been familiar with a range of doctrines enunciated by Magisterial, Radical, and Spiritual Reformers. Among the most important of these were Martin Luther and mediators of his thought. Boehme had certainly heard Lutheran sermons and hymns; was familiar with Lutheran prayer formula; and upheld Lutheran teaching on the importance of personal faith for salvation, on grace being freely given as a gift by God, on Christ's corporeal presence within the Communion bread and wine, and on the ubiquity of Christ's body. But though Boehme affirmed essential articles of Lutheran faith prior to receiving absolution and the sacrament of the Lord's Supper on his death-bed, he diverged from Luther on several significant points—notably on the crucial question of free will, where he also differed sharply from mainstream Calvinist thinking on predestination. Furthermore, Boehme's allegorical method of scriptural exegesis went against the grain of Luther's predominantly literal biblical commentaries (if not his sermons). Consequently, and without biblical justification, Boehme developed beliefs on the process of creation, the fall of the rebel angels, and Adam's prelapsarian androgynous nature that were fundamentally opposed to Lutheran orthodoxy. In addition, and with a measure of justification, Boehme has been regarded as an independently minded interpreter and continuator of the Spiritual Reformers and an inheritor of a religious tendency—tradition might be too strong—incorporating writings by or attributed to Sebastian Franck (1499–1542), Caspar Schwenckfeld (1490–1561), and Valentin Weigel (1533–1588).

Boehme does not mention or allude to Franck, and if he did happen upon his teachings, then these may have been mediated to him indirectly. But he does engage critically with Schwenckfeld, conspicuously on the connected issues of Christ's nature and how Christ was present in humanity. There had been a substantial and visible Schwenckfelder presence in Görlitz from the 1560s, and since a number of Boehme's most prominent supporters had Schwenckfelder backgrounds, it is unsurprising that Boehme was familiar with some of Schwenckfeld's works.<sup>46</sup> Likewise Boehme knew Weigel, sometimes borrowing—most likely from influential manuscript works on cosmogony—and occasionally controverting. Thus, Boehme asserted that Weigel erred in denying that the Virgin Mary had been entirely human, yet at the same time concurred with Weigel's treatment of the "new birth" and the "union of humanity in Christ." Accordingly, he neither condemned nor despised Weigel's writings, nor those who read them.<sup>47</sup> Boehme may also have read devotional works by the Lutheran theologian Johann Arndt (1555–1621). Drawing on a range of mystical writings, Arndt's teaching emphasized faith, humility, prayer, and true repentance. Examples of similarities of thought, however, may be explained by common dependence on the same sources, notably Weigel and Paracelsus.

Boehme's indebtedness to Paracelsus is indisputable. He drew on him when writing "Aurora" and defended Paracelsus's opinions in correspondence with Paul Kaym. From Paracelsus, either directly or else mediated by

his medical acquaintances, Boehme derived the alchemically inflected terms *arcana*, *tincture*, and *turba* together with the three categories of Salt, Mercury, and Sulphur. So extensive was this borrowing that it did not escape the notice of contemporary critics: Christian Beckmann found more than twenty-five instances of words and phrases used by Boehme in a manner similar to Paracelsus and Weigel, while Erasmus Francisci stated that Boehme quoted from Paracelsus on more than thirty occasions.<sup>48</sup> Modern scholars concur. Yet Boehme's treatment of Paracelsus was not slavish. As Howard Brinton observed, he initially contradicted the Paracelsian or pseudo-Paracelsian *Philosophia ad Athenienses* (*Philosophy to the Athenians*) on the question of whether God created heaven and earth out of nothing.<sup>49</sup> Interestingly, the English translation of the Paracelsian *Aurora* was published with a discourse attributed to Johann Siebmacher entitled *Wasserstein der Weysen* (*Water-Stone of the Wise Men*; Frankfurt, 1619). In a letter of July 1622, Boehme commended the printed version of this work as a clear and worthy exposition of the alchemical art.<sup>50</sup>

There were also several comparatively obscure figures with whose writings Boehme engaged: Hans Weyrauch, Balthaser Tilke (fl.1621), Ezechiel Meth (d.1640), Esajas Stiefel (1561–1627), Paul Kaym, and perhaps Paul Nagel. Weyrauch claimed prophetic gifts and was said to have been a weaver from Olmütz, Moravia (modern Olomouc, Czech Republic). Having examined his writings, Boehme conceded that he may be an “honest Brother,” but nonetheless rejected Weyrauch's boast of secret knowledge.<sup>51</sup> Tilke was a Silesian nobleman and suspected crypto-Calvinist who wrote a pasquinade against certain notions expounded in Boehme's “Aurora” and then a refutation of Boehme's fifth book. With these libels in hand, Boehme responded with two polemical apologies. Meth was an alchemist with messianic pretensions, some of whose letters survive and against whom Boehme wrote in 1622. These messianic delusions were shared by Meth's uncle Stiefel. An avid follower of Weigel and an antinomian sect-master who believed himself incapable of sinning, Stiefel was among the first to mention Boehme's doctrines in print. The connection was probably established by Stiefel's former supporter, Balthasar Walther. Doubtless through a trusted intermediary, Stiefel sent a treatise on “The Threefold State of Man” with accompanying letter to Boehme. The “Teutonick” completed his response on April 18th, 1621, acknowledging that Stiefel “may indeed, be an honest or vertuous new born or *Regenerate Man*, and in Christ with his *New-birth*.” But he fervently denied that Stiefel had attained total perfection, believing it impossible for the outward body to achieve this on earth. Boehme followed this with a response to Stiefel's exposition of four scriptural texts.<sup>52</sup> As for Nagel, he was an alchemist, astrologer, and chiliastic prophet from Torgau, Saxony. A reader of Weigel as well as Boehme's “Aurora” in manuscript, he reproduced extracts from the latter concerning the creation of three angelic kingdoms in his pamphlet *Prodromus astronomiae apocalypticae* (*Herald of apocalyptic astronomy*; Danzig, 1620).<sup>53</sup>

Taken together, these mediated and directly encountered textual and oral sources explain the otherwise problematic presence in the corpus of a non-university educated shoemaker of sophisticated mystical, apocalyptic, alchemical, astrological, and seemingly Gnostic, Neoplatonic, and Kabbalistic ideas—especially since Boehme did not read Hebrew, Greek, or Latin. Thus, through Luther’s writings or perhaps Moller’s instruction, Boehme may have become acquainted with devotional and mystical works by the German Dominicans Meister Eckhart (ca.1260–1328), Johannes Tauler (ca.1300–1361), and Heinrich Suso (ca.1295–1366); Thomas à Kempis (ca.1380–1471); as well as the anonymous fourteenth-century *Theologia Germanica*. This could account for the current of negative theology and fascination with the abyss in his writings. Certainly von Franckenberg, who became a devotee of these “old *German* enlightened Men,” purposefully positioned Boehme within a tradition of German mysticism.<sup>54</sup> Again, Stoudt and, more recently, Cyril O’Regan have suggested that Boehme’s apocalyptic thought drew inspiration—however indirectly—from a deeper well, namely the tripartite eschatological scheme announced by the Calabrian-born abbot Joachim of Fiore (ca.1135–1202). Presumably mediated through Paracelsus or Lutheran interpreters more generally, Joachim’s conception of three ages corresponding to God the Father (Jewish Law), God the Son (Christian Gospel), and the Holy Ghost (Spirit) must, as O’Regan accepts, have been drastically modified by Boehme; if, that is, he was ever aware of it. For although Boehme declared that the “great Day of Revelation and the Final Judgment” was approaching, he developed a sevenfold divinely-structured periodization of history perhaps taken from the seven seals of Revelation and culminating in the time of Enoch (“the seventh from Adam,” Jude 1:14).<sup>55</sup>

With his espousal of Sophia as a symbol of the Noble Virgin of Divine Wisdom, Boehme invited the charge that he was reiterating ancient Gnostic heresies. This was the opinion of some hostile seventeenth-century commentators and, having been taken up by the nineteenth-century German theologian Ferdinand Christian Bauer, subsequently found support among a handful of modern scholars. In this vein, Weeks has written of Boehme’s “increasing use of Gnostic symbols and images,” while O’Regan has argued that Boehme’s body of work is “a privileged site of the return of a Gnostic modality of thought in modernity.”<sup>56</sup> As O’Regan admits, however, Boehme “neither cites Gnostic nor Valentinian sources in his texts, nor mentions them in his letters.”<sup>57</sup> Indeed, there is scant evidence for continuous and direct transmission of unadulterated Gnostic doctrines through the ages. That said, traces of Gnosticism could have reached Boehme by way of incorporation within Neoplatonism and perhaps also Hermetic literature; though, in the latter instance, the question of Gnostic influence remains open. If this were so, mediation would most likely have been through Paracelsus.

Just as writings under the name Paracelsus may have been a conduit for Gnostic vestiges, so too did they channel streams of Neoplatonism. Running from Plotinus through the Florentine Platonist Marsilio Ficino



(1433–1499), this Neoplatonic current may, in its appropriation and adaptation, partially account for Boehme's elaboration of a process of emanation during the creation as well as what certain commentators regard as a pantheistic imbued conception of nature. More striking still are resemblances in Boehme's thought to some concepts in a key Jewish Kabbalistic work, *Sefer Ha-Zohar* (*The Book of Splendour*), as well as to aspects of later Christian Kabbalistic thought as elaborated in Johannes Reuchlin's *De arte Cabalistica* (Hagenau, 1517). Boehme writes in his unfinished answers to "The 177 Theosophic Questions" (1624) of "Cabala and Magia" and then the "Holy Cabala," although by itself this signifies little; the Paracelsian *Aurora* likewise used the term to describe a mystical and prophetic art full of "Divine Mysteries," just as magic contained "natural secrets."<sup>58</sup> Even so, there is convincing evidence that Boehme knew specific Kabbalistic teachings, albeit at several removes. Hence, the Kabbalists' *En-Sof* (the Infinite) has been compared with Boehme's *Ungrund* (mystical being of the Deity); their *Adam Kadmon* (primordial man) with Boehme's androgynous Adam; the highest three attributes of the Zohar's ten *Sefirot* (potencies of the manifest God), that is, *Keter* (crown), *Hokhmah* (wisdom), and *Binah* (intelligence), with Boehme's conception of an imminent Trinity. Penman even demonstrates in this volume a specific instance of Boehme adopting a Kabbalistic scriptural interpretation found in Reuchlin, which was mediated to him through Walther. Cumulatively, these Neoplatonic and Kabbalistic resonances indicate Boehme was no mere plagiarist but a profound and original—if occasionally erratic—thinker who veered towards synthesis on a grand scale.

Allied to Neoplatonism and Kabbalism was belief in magic. Unlike Heinrich Cornelius Agrippa, who in his infamous compendium *De occulta philosophia sive magia libri tres* (Cologne, 1533) delineated three types of magic—divine (the secrets of God), celestial (the influence of stellar bodies), and natural (the properties of things in nature)—Boehme distinguished between divine and natural magic in "Mysterium Magnum." Magic, however, plays a minor role in Boehme's worldview, and what knowledge he had of it probably derived from Walther, who copied and collected Paracelsian, Kabbalistic, and magical texts.<sup>59</sup> Much the same can be said of Boehme's lack of engagement with the *Corpus Hermeticum*, a haphazard body of ancient Greek literature ascribed to the god Hermes and consisting of approximately seventeen dialogues. Widely circulated in Latin and then vernacular translations—including Sebastian Franck's German paraphrase of the first colloquy *Poimandres* (Augsburg, 1538)—these treatises, despite being exposed as forgeries, were nonetheless valued by the English Boehme translators John Sparrow and Charles Hotham. Indeed, they constitute a distinctive feature of the wider milieu in which the Teutonic's writings were sympathetically received: Sparrow glossed Boehme's reference to the "Eternal Mind" with a marginal note to *Poimandres*,<sup>60</sup> while the ardent Behmenist Abraham Willemsz van Beyerland financed his own Dutch translation of Hermetic books published at Amsterdam in 1643. Moreover, the fabled

“Tabula Smaragdina” (“Emerald Tablet”) attributed to Hermes was printed in Latin translation with commentary by the Paracelsian Gerhard Dorn in volume one of *Theatrum Chemicum* (Oberursel, 1602; reprinted, Strasbourg, 1613), an enormous alchemical compendium that may have been owned by some of Boehme’s wealthier acquaintances.

Another integral element within this milieu was the Rosicrucian manifestos, the earliest of which was an allegory written in 1605 by the Lutheran Johann Valentin Andreae (1586–1654) entitled *Chymische Hochzeit: Christiani Rosencreuz Anno 1459* (*The Chemical wedding*; published anonymously in Strasbourg, 1616). Having been circulated in manuscript, these works began emerging in printed German and Latin editions from 1614 and were, as Penman notes, available in Görlitz through the town’s principal bookseller. The most notable advocated a utopian universal reformation akin to Boehme’s slightly later vision of a Great Reformation. Their cause was furthered by another Lutheran figure, Michael Maier (1566–1622), who supposed that the Fraternity of the Rosy Cross possessed the secrets of nature and whose own writings blended alchemical motifs with Hermetic wisdom. Further afield was the English physician Robert Fludd (1574–1637), an apologist for the Rosicrucians whose major cosmological works were issued in Latin at Oppenheim from 1617. Significantly, some of Boehme’s patrons and followers read and collected these Rosicrucian writings. A few even participated in the ensuing European-wide printed debate.

Then there is the unmistakable adoption of heliocentrism in Boehme’s earliest attempt to formulate an explanation for the planets’ motion. Despite professing ignorance of the finer points of mathematics and astrology, he rejected the Ptolemaic system, insisting that the Sun did not orbit the Earth in a day and a night. Rather, the Earth imitated the motion of a wheel, revolving around the Sun in the space of a year. So too did the planets closest to the Sun, Mercury and Venus. But the outer planets—Mars, Jupiter, and Saturn—did not complete their revolution in a year because they were too far from the Sun and hence their orbit was of greater circumference. This vision of the heavens corresponded most closely to that advanced by the Polish astronomer Nicolaus Copernicus, though it is unlikely that Boehme had read his *De Revolutionibus Orbium Coelestium* (*On the Revolution of the Heavenly Spheres*; Nuremberg, 1543). More probable is that Boehme was familiar with astrological works then circulating in Görlitz, a town where the sometime mayor Bartholomäus Scultetus had corresponded with the astronomers Tycho Brahe and Johannes Kepler.<sup>61</sup> Some years later, Boehme elaborated on his conception of the cosmos in “The Threefold Life of Man” (1620). Here, the universe was imagined as concentric circles: the outer wheel consisted of the twelve signs of the zodiac together with the other constellations; within were the seven planets; then the Sun; and finally the inner wheels of Fire, the heavenly Tincture, Majesty, and the number three with the cross.<sup>62</sup> This idiosyncratic heliocentric scheme was remarked upon by Christian Beckmann, who dismissed it as an old song.<sup>63</sup>

For Beckmann it was incredible that an “illiterate” common man could have such a profound and extraordinary knowledge of God and Nature. These misgivings made him suspect that Boehme had been incapable of expounding on such abstruse subjects. Nor was he alone in expressing doubts that the books written and circulated under the name “Teutonicus” were the work of a lowly shoemaker.<sup>64</sup> Anticipating the authorship controversy surrounding the plays of his more famous contemporary Shakespeare, the contention that Jacob Boehme did not write Boehme gradually became more pronounced. In the 1690s, for example, the Lutheran pastor and Orientalist Abraham Hinckelmann insisted that Balthasar Walther had been the real author of these works and that Boehme had not written “a single line” of what was attributed to him.<sup>65</sup> Alternatively, some believed it was not a learned associate but the father of lies himself who had dredged up some “old reprobated *Heresy*” from the “bottomless Pit” of Hell and passed off a “visionary Piece of Devilism” under Boehme’s name.<sup>66</sup>

Such skepticism surrounding Boehme’s authorship was the obverse of the hagiographic tendency we have witnessed. The truth of course was that neither God nor the Devil was responsible. His disciples may have claimed that Boehme had been favored with God’s great and secret spirit, which caused him to produce amazing writings that in their clarity and purity were unparalleled since the apostolic age. Yet some were also responsible for educating him in the rudiments of Latin through conversation and correspondence. Hence, whereas “Aurora” was, to quote Stoudt, “a primitive, profound, chaotic, exasperating, prophetic work of cant and rant as well as of insight,” the writings of Boehme’s intellectual maturity show he had found ways of expressing himself beyond the “barrenness of his mother tongue.”<sup>67</sup> These included the invention of German neologisms which, on a cursory reading, made his writings appear “harsh and uncouth,” even “obscure and unintelligible.” Added to this was Boehme’s claim that he knew the “*Language of Nature*,” through which he could ascertain not only the inward virtues and qualities of plants, herbs, and stones, but also understand the gist of conversations in Latin and French—a talent akin to the Pentecostal gift of tongues (Acts 2:1–15). All of which meant his writings were unlike “other men’s books.”<sup>68</sup>

Indisputably, at stake here was an unwelcome plebeian challenge to scholastic learning, doctrinal orthodoxy, and the jealously guarded clerical monopoly of biblical interpretation. On this point, the various hagiographic and mythopoeic representations of Boehme’s persona and concomitant veneration of his almost impenetrable writings converge in agreement with the hostile portrait promoted in the heresiography. Throughout this struggle for interpretative hegemony, Boehme’s authority was strengthened in the hagiography by claims of divine illumination while being weakened in the heresiography by charges of arrogance, ignorance, heterodoxy, and presumption. He himself despaired of a wicked world, yet contented himself with knowledge of the approaching apocalypse. Moreover, Boehme justified

his lack of learning by drawing parallels with God's "Great" and "Small" prophets, mere "vulgar plain and mean" shepherds and herdsmen, as well with Christ's apostles, who were but "poor, despised illiterate Fishermen." Invoking Luther's first reformation of the church, he declaimed:

*What were they that in all Ages in the Church of Christ stood to it most stoutly and constantly? The poor contemptible despised people, who shed their Bloud for the sake of Christ.*

Therefore, who but a "poor *Mechanic*" drawn from the "lowest Class" could herald a second reformation?

*The Spirit sheweth and declareth, that yet before the End, many a Layman, will know and understand more, then now the Wittiest or Cunningest Doctors know.*<sup>69</sup>

A few months before his premature death, Boehme prophesied that although his writings would be discarded by his fellow countrymen, foreign nations would joyfully take them up. This prediction was largely borne out during the seventeenth century as Boehme's works were "vilified and cast away" in his homeland but painstakingly published in Dutch and English translations.<sup>70</sup> Having endured both vehement clerical opposition and suppression, it was, so his followers believed, a posthumous vindication. Indeed, they considered the survival of Boehme's writings providential.<sup>71</sup> And it is remarkable how little has been lost. Besides the book on the "Last Judgment" (1624?) mentioned earlier, there may no longer exist a treatise entitled "The herbs of nature," a work on the noble virgin Sophia, a few minor pieces, and some correspondence. Some writings also remained unfinished: "Aurora" (1612), "The 177 Theosophic Questions" (1624), "The Holy Week or a Prayer Book" (1624), and "The Highly precious Gate of the Divine Vision" (also known as "A little book of Divine Contemplation," 1622–24). Regrettable as these losses and incompletions are, they are nonetheless outweighed by the huge corpus of Boehme's extant writings. Naturally, it was through their effective dissemination by a combination of scribal and print publication, both in the original German and several major European languages, that Boehme's legacy was ensured—a legacy which will be explored in subsequent chapters of this collection.

## NOTES

1. I am grateful to Leigh Penman and Andrew Weeks both for clarifying a number of points and their helpful suggestions. All dates are according to the Gregorian calendar. Unless otherwise indicated, quotations in the first section are taken from various versions of Abraham von Franckenberg's life of Boehme. The last and longest of these, completed on September 23, 1651,

was published together with other relevant documents in “De vita et scriptis Jacobi Böhmii,” in Johann Wilhelm Ueberfeld (ed.), *Theosophia Revelata* (Leiden, 1730). An English translation of this miscellany by Francis Okely was issued as *Memoirs of the Life, Death, Burial and Wonderful Writings of Jacob Behmen* (Northampton: James Lackington, 1780).

2. *Memoirs*, trans. Okely, 1–2, 4.
3. One son apparently became a goldsmith, a second a shoemaker, and two apprenticed into other trades. Three of them (Jacob, Tobias, and Elias) survived their father although all had died by 1669. A namesake, who was a tanner, with whom Boehme has sometimes been confused, had two daughters.
4. Boehme lived here until 1610. On the three-hundredth anniversary of his death in 1924 a plaque was erected commemorating the fact. Today, the building houses a small museum in Zgorzelec, Poland.
5. *Memoirs*, trans. Okely, 2–3.
6. Ueberfeld (ed.), *Theosophia Revelata*, vol. 1, 8–9. I am grateful to Andrew Weeks for the translation.
7. *Memoirs*, trans. Okely, 7–8.
8. *Ibid.*, 8–9.
9. Howard Brinton, *Mystic Will. Based Upon a Study of the Philosophy of Jacob Boehme* (New York: Macmillan, 1930), 50. An eighteenth-century chronicle added the embellishment that Boehme was placed in the town stocks.
10. *Memoirs*, trans. Okely, 120.
11. *Ibid.*, 16.
12. “Theosophick Letters,” in *The Remainder of Books written by Jacob Behme*, trans. John Sparrow (London: Giles Calvert, 1662), 44–48; *Memoirs*, trans. Okely, 40–45.
13. Boehme, *De Electione Gratiae, and Quaestiones Theosophicae*, trans. John Rolleston Earle (London: Constable & Co., 1930), liv, lv.
14. “Apologie,” in *Remainder*, 5, 12, 14, 21, 25–27, 34, 35; Boehme, *The Epistles of Jacob Behmen*, trans. J[ohn] E[l]listone (London: Giles Calvert, 1649), 33 (203–06); “Theosophick Letters,” in *Remainder*, 22, 24–25.
15. *Memoirs*, trans. Okely, 45–47.
16. “Theosophick Letters,” in *Remainder*, 28, 33.
17. “Theosophick Letters,” in *Remainder*, 27–35; Boehme, *Epistles*, 35.13–17 (214).
18. *Memoirs*, trans. Okely, 39–40, 47–49.
19. *Ibid.*, 23, 51, 52, 64.
20. *Ibid.*, 23–24, 53–54, 64–65.
21. *Ibid.*, 25, 54–58, 60, 65, 66, 67–68, 68–79, 91–98.
22. *Ibid.*, 21, 25–27, 61, 103.
23. Ueberfeld (ed.), *Theosophia Revelata*, vol. 1, 20–21. I am grateful to Andrew Weeks for the translation.
24. Theodor Harmsen (ed.), *Jacob Böhm's Weg in die Welt* (Amsterdam: In de Pelikaan, 2007), 77. I am grateful to Leigh Penman for the translation.
25. *Memoirs*, trans. Okely, 20.
26. *Ibid.*, 21.
27. *Ibid.*, 1, 9, 14, 27, 29, 86, 134.
28. *Ibid.*, 110.
29. *Ibid.*, 112–13.
30. *Memoirs*, trans. Okely, 14; L. T. I. Penman, “Böhme's Student and Mentor: the Liegnitz Physician Balthasar Walther (c.1558–c.1630),” in Wilhelm Kühlmann and Friedrich Vollhardt (eds.), *Offenbarung und Episteme* (Berlin and Boston: Walter de Gruyter, 2012), 47–65.



31. *Memoirs*, trans. Okely, 19, 33.
32. John Stoudt, *Sunrise to Eternity. A Study in Jacob Boehme's Life and Thought* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1957); Andrew Weeks, *Boehme: An Intellectual Biography of the Seventeenth-Century Philosopher and Mystic* (Albany, NY: SUNY Press, 1991).
33. Boehme, *Epistles*, 15.39–40 (134–35).
34. Boehme, *Die Urschriften*, ed. Werner Buddecke (2 vols., Stuttgart: Friedrich Frommann Verlag, 1963–66), vol. 2, 399–402. I am grateful to Leigh Penman for the translation.
35. Boehme, *Epistles*, 4.2, 20–21, 26–27, 34–35, 39, 50–51, 73, 87 (47–61).
36. *Ibid.*, 20.23–36 (160–61).
37. Weeks, *Boehme*, 80–81.
38. Boehme, *Aurora*, trans. John Sparrow (London: Giles Calvert, 1656), 19.5 (425).
39. Boehme, *Epistles*, 2.10–14, 3.5–6, 3.35, 4.76–78, 9.27 (20–21, 36, 44, 60, 108).
40. *Memoirs*, trans. Okely, 8.
41. Boehme, *Aurora*, 10.45, 19.4, 19.67, 21.61, 22.9–14, 25.46–48 (184, 425, 438, 492, 512–13, 594); Boehme, *Concerning The Three Principles of The Divine Essence*, trans. J[ohn] S[parrow] (London: Humphrey Blunden, 1648), 10.1 (77).
42. Bo Andersson, “Du Solst wissen es ist aus keinem stein gesogen.” *Studien zu Jacob Böhmes Aurora oder Morgen Röte im Aufgang* (Stockholm: Almqvist & Wiksell International, 1986).
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44. Epistle 54 (April 3, 1624), in Stoudt, *Sunrise*, 180–83.
45. Weeks, *Boehme*, 159.
46. Boehme, *Epistles*, 2.54 (30).
47. Boehme, *Epistles*, 2.52–53, 2.59–60 (29–30, 31); Boehme, “Theosophick Letters,” in *Remainder*, 5.
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51. *Ibid.*, 2.51 (29).
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53. L. T. I. Penman, “‘Repulsive Blasphemies.’ Paul Nagel’s Appropriation of Unprinted Works of Jacob Böhme and Valentin Weigel in his *Prodromus astronomiae apocalypticae* (1620),” *Daphnis*, 38 (2009), 599–622.
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55. Boehme, *Aurora*, 4.3 (74); Boehme, *Mysterium Magnum*, trans. John Ellistone and John Sparrow (London: Humphrey Blunden, 1654), 30.34–46 (181–84); Stoudt, *Sunrise*, 124, 127–28, 164, 297–98; O'Regan, *Gnostic Apocalypse*, 145, 146, 161–75.
56. Weeks, *Boehme*, 121–22, 144, 148, 175, 182, 204; O'Regan, *Gnostic Apocalypse*, 2, 15.
57. O'Regan, *Gnostic Apocalypse*, 15, 148.
58. “177 Theosophick Questions,” in *Several Treatises*, trans. John Sparrow (London: Lodowick Lloyd, 1661), 3.50, 6.11 (41, 49); *Paracelsus His Aurora*, trans. J[ohn] H[arding] (London: Giles Calvert, 1659), 2, 3, 8, 9–10.

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